Ryan Padraig Kelly World

Audrey was determined to find the culprit, but everyone looked so suspicious…

Audrey adjusted her halter-neck swimming costume, tucked a loose strand of hair inside her rubber cap and picked up her towel.

The lido changing-room was quiet this early in the morning.

Regardless of the season, she and her friends, Betty, Frank and Cameron, met every day before work to take a quick dip.

She wondered if she should wait for Betty, but decided to take the plunge before the others arrived.

Outside, the enormous pool glistened in the pale sunlight.

The slide and diving board at the far end were empty. The fountain hadn’t been turned on yet and the shop and café were still closed.

Audrey could see the lifeguard inside the building, chatting to Vera as she set up for the day.

Audrey dumped her towel on one of the many sun-loungers positioned around the pool edge, sat down and dangled her feet in the water.

As she looked up, she saw something floating at the far end.

It looked too long to be a ball and too small for a lilo.

Perhaps someone had left their towel behind and it had blown into the water.

She couldn’t see very well as she’d left her glasses in the changing-room, but she thought she ought to rescue it.

She got up and wandered round to take a closer look.

As she drew nearer, it was clear it wasn’t a towel at all and her heart began to beat faster.

Her breath caught in her throat. It couldn’t be, could it? Her eyes must be playing tricks on her.

However, a few steps nearer and there was no doubt.

It was a body – a woman’s body!

Audrey felt an icy shiver pass through her, and she moved closer, peering at the girl before her.

There, fully clothed and floating on the surface, was Betty.

Her face was as white as the railings and her eyes were staring lifelessly at the sky.

Frank and Cameron had just left the male changing-rooms and, as

she let out a piercing scream and staggered backwards, they raced towards her, closely followed by the lifeguard.

“What is it, Audrey? Are you all right?” Frank reached her first, then stopped in horror as his eyes fell on Betty.

“It can’t be. How?” He froze, transfixed.

Cameron had stopped a little further away, his face drained of colour.

“Betty,” he choked out.

Audrey sobbed, her body shaking uncontrollably, and Frank pulled himself together.

He wrapped her in his towel and led her to a seat.

“We’ll call the police,” he said quietly.

Later that day, the three friends were sitting in Audrey’s front room.

They hadn’t been able to face going to work, and the police enquiries had taken up most of the morning anyway.

Audrey’s mother, Ida, had made them lunch, but her daughter had found she could eat very little.

She couldn’t get the image of Betty’s body out of her mind.

“I think you might all be in need of something stronger than tea today,” Ida declared.

To Audrey’s surprise, her mother went to the sideboard, took out her father’s brandy bottle and poured them each a drink.

Ida noticed her daughter’s raised eyebrows and smiled kindly.

“Purely medicinal,” she said, handing a cup to Frank with a wink.

“Thank you, Mrs Maynard. It’s really been a terrible shock,” he said.

Cameron nodded in agreement.

Audrey was very grateful for her mother’s solid presence as she bustled about in her housecoat, taking care of them.

“I just don’t understand it,” she burst out. “Who could possibly have wanted to kill Betty?

“She didn’t have an enemy in the world. Everyone liked her.”

She stared around the room, blinking back tears.

In the familiar, everyday surroundings it was hard to believe it had happened and that she hadn’t just imagined it all.

The electric fire was still in the tiled fireplace, the mirror hanging from its chain above.

The black and white TV, bought for the coronation, was in the corner.

They were seated on the same bulky brown sofas, with their antimacassars, that had always been here.

Audrey sighed and Frank cast her an anxious glance.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “I’m sorry you were the one who found Betty. You’ve had such a shock.”

“I’ll be all right,” she told him, sipping the brandy. “It’s been a

dreadful day for all of us. Are you OK, Cameron?”

He nodded.

“I just can’t help thinking that I only saw her yesterday. Everything was fine . . .”

His voice trailed away.

“Oh, yes,” Ida remarked. “I saw the two of you chatting in the high street.

“You were carrying that large box and she looked so well, wearing that pretty red dress with her gorgeous bouffant hair.”

She shook her head and topped up Cameron’s cup.

“It will take time, but eventually you will heal,” she told them.

Audrey hoped Mother was right. She was worried about Cameron.

She hadn’t known him for as long as Frank and Betty, but he’d been white as a sheet all day and not himself at all.

Perhaps he’d been sweet on her friend?

Actually, it was through Betty’s ex-boyfriend that they’d first met Cameron – he and Noel worked together – and that memory gave her a horrid idea.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

“It couldn’t be Noel, could it?” she asked. “He always seemed so nice, but he was devastated when Betty broke up with him.”

Frank’s eyes widened and he swallowed.

“You could be on to something there, Audrey,” he stated. “He seemed decent, but he was devoted to her. I thought he’d struggle to get over it.”

Cameron nodded sombrely.

“You’re both right,” he said, frowning, “and I don’t like to tell you this, but there have also been some thefts at work.

“The bosses have been talking to Noel about it. He might not be a trustworthy fellow, after all.”

“Goodness, how awful. A thief and a murderer – is it possible?” Audrey’s blue eyes were wide, and she fiddled with her pearls distractedly.

Could she believe this of Noel?

It was true that he was the quiet type, and he’d dropped them all after his break-up with Betty, but still . . .

“It is hard to believe,” Frank agreed. “But he had motive, and I guess he had opportunity, too.

“He knew Betty’s routine and he could have gone to the lido early to meet her.”

“That’s true,” Audrey agreed.

“I think it’s very likely, especially since it might have been an accident,” Cameron added.

Perhaps Noel had gone there to win Betty back, they’d quarrelled, and he’d pushed her over.

It was a knock to the head that had killed her, according to the police.

She hadn’t drowned.

A few days later, the trio were back at the lido.

They hadn’t felt able to resume their morning swims, but instead they were hoping to find evidence.

Now she was feeling a little better, Audrey was determined to get justice for her friend.

They would get to the bottom of this murder, one way or another.

“Morning, Ernie,” they greeted the attendant at the kiosk.

“How are you three today?” he responded. “I hope you’re taking care of yourselves. It’s good to see you back here.”

Ernie often manned the east entrance to the lido, collecting the

2d fee and passing the time of day with folk.

“What can I do to help you, this fine morning?” he asked. “I don’t think you’ve come for a swim.”

He looked pointedly at their empty arms – no towels in sight.

“We’re trying to find out what happened to Betty,” Frank told him. “We want to be sure the culprit’s brought to justice.”

Ernie seemed taken aback.

“I’m happy to do what I can, but don’t you think you’d best leave it to the police?” he suggested. “I

wouldn’t want you getting into trouble.”

“Perhaps Ernie’s right?” Cameron looked anxious, but the others shook their heads.

“We’re not interfering with the police enquiry,” Audrey said. “It can’t hurt if we find out some things as well.”

Ernie looked doubtful, but he smiled.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“We wanted to know who came into the lido that morning,” Frank stated. “There must have been someone else around.”

Ernie scratched his head and looked thoughtful.

“You know, I’ve been wondering about that myself,” he said, “but there wasn’t anyone else.

“Miss Betty came in first, then I saw Audrey and then the gents.”

“You didn’t see Noel Crayford?” Audrey asked.

“No, not him, nor anyone else,” Ernie confirmed. “My guess is that someone came in by the west gate.

“Maybe try Vera? She could have seen something from the shop.”

Vera! At the mention of her name, Audrey had a moment of revelation.

If no-one else had entered the lido that morning, then it had to be someone who was already here. Someone like Vera!

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Frank was watching her closely.

She nodded.

“It’s possible. She’s always here early, but what motive does she have?” Audrey pointed out.

Cameron looked uncertain.

“It could be her,” he muttered. “I don’t think they got on very well. Didn’t they have a big argument recently?”

“Yes,” Audrey agreed, her face grim. “They never got on. I think Vera’s always been jealous of Betty.

“She used to bully her at school, you know, and she was sweet on Noel, too.”

They said goodbye to Ernie and wandered through to the pool.

A couple of people in white rubber hats were ploughing up and down.

Audrey avoided looking at the far end, where she had found Betty’s body.

Instead, she directed her eyes towards the changing-rooms and café.

It was a lovely morning. The sun glinted from the glass and horse chestnuts waved on the far side of the wall.

She took a deep breath and entered the shop.

Vera looked up as they came in and frowned.

“What do you lot want?” she asked. “I’m surprised you’ve got the nerve to show your faces here.”

“What are you talking about?” Audrey asked, taken aback.

“One of you is a murderer. I’d have thought you’d be keeping a low profile,” Vera said.

“Betty was our friend. You’re the one who was nasty to her,” Audrey pointed out.

“She was a horrible stuck-up thing, but I’m not the violent kind.”

“Are you sure about that?” Frank stepped forward in Audrey’s defence.

“Ask the lifeguard if you don’t believe me. I daresay it was her,” Vera added, pointing spitefully at Audrey. “They’re one as bad as the other.”

“Clearly, we’ll learn nothing sensible here.” Frank turned on his heel and the others followed him out.

A few days later, Audrey and Frank were making their way along the road towards Cameron’s house.

It had turned chilly and Audrey pulled her wool coat tightly around her, glad of her hat and gloves.

Frank strode beside her in his trilby and scarf, his shoes shining, ready for work.

A mother with a large pram walked past them and a Hillman Minx drove by on its way into town.

“I’m sorry about Vera,” Frank said to her. “I hope you’re not upset.”

“Really Frank, I’m fine,” Audrey assured him.

He’d asked her this every morning since they’d gone back to the lido.

“If it wasn’t for the lifeguard giving her an alibi, I’d be certain she’d done it,” he went on.

Audrey shook her head and sighed.

“Vera was pretty rotten to Betty at school, but I think underneath she just feels inadequate.”

“Well, I suppose that’s tough.” Frank stroked his chin. “I didn’t like the way she spoke to you – and to accuse you of murdering your own friend!”

Audrey smiled.

Frank was becoming very protective of her, and he looked very handsome, striding beside her in the sunshine.

“Let’s not think about Vera,” she suggested. “I just hope Cameron’s all right. I still don’t think he’s himself.”

“We’ll soon see.” Frank smiled down at her.

They reached Cameron’s front door and rang the bell.

His mother, Martha, answered, looking flustered.

“Oh, come in, you two,” she invited them.

They entered and followed her to a small sitting-room.

“I’m afraid you’ve missed Cameron this morning,” Martha told them. “He’s gone off early, but do sit down. Let me get you some tea.”

Frank glanced at his

watch and looked as if he might refuse, but Audrey took pity on Martha.

“That would be lovely,” she said.

They would still make it to work on time, after all.

“I don’t know what’s got into that boy,” Martha told them a few minutes later, as she poured tea into china cups. “He’s coming and going at very funny hours.

“He goes out at the crack of dawn sometimes, including meeting you all at seven the day that poor girl died.”

Audrey and Frank’s eyes met in shock.

They always got to the lido for 7.45 a.m., but Cameron had been early!

“He was really late home last night, too,” Martha continued. “Had to talk to his boss about these transistor radio thefts at work.

“He’s not been himself for a while.”

Martha looked really upset and Audrey didn’t know what to say.

Her mind was whirling, and there was a knot forming in her stomach.

What did all this mean?

“Don’t worry, Mrs Chatham. We’ll keep an eye on him,” she said.

Audrey glanced gratefully at Frank. Hopefully he could soothe Cameron’s mother.

Audrey had something she must do.

“I’m sorry, but may I powder my nose?” she asked.

“Of course, dear. Top of the stairs,” Martha replied.

Audrey slipped out of the room and climbed up the stairs.

She paused on the landing and looked about.

Which one could be Cameron’s room?

Quietly, she opened a couple of doors until she found it.

She went inside, rapidly opening and closing wardrobes, a large chest, and eventually searching under the bed.

She was about to give up when she felt something in the far back corner.

She could do with a torch, but since she didn’t have one, she slid herself right underneath.

Her fingers closed over the edge of a cardboard box and she pulled it out carefully.

Dusting herself down, she opened the lid.

To her horror, though not complete surprise, nestling inside were a number of Pye P123-BQ transistor radios, worth around £18 each.

She gasped.

Cameron was the thief and she feared that he might be more than that.

Audrey and Frank sat at a table in a café, listening to Elvis Presley issuing from the radio.

They each had a milkshake in front of them and they were discussing

the previous day’s events, trying to make sense of it all.

Cameron was in custody and had confessed both to theft and to manslaughter.

“It’s so hard to take in,” Audrey said, sipping the ice-cold drink. “I know we hadn’t known him for long, but he was one of our friends!”

Frank nodded grimly.

“It’s very shocking, but at least Betty will get justice now.” He gazed at Audrey admiringly. “You were so clever to work it all out.”

“It was the mothers who made me think of it,” she explained. “Martha telling us that Cameron was a suspect in the thefts and that he’d arrived early at the lido.

“Then I remembered what my own mother said about the cardboard box he was carrying – the day he’d met Betty in the high street.”

“Yes.” Frank nodded. “The box full of stolen transistors. Betty must have put two and two together and realised he was the thief.

“And when he met her at the lido, she threatened to tell on him. They argued and he pushed her over.”

Frank took Audrey’s hand and she felt a little better.

“If Vera hadn’t been so busy chatting up the lifeguard, she might have seen him,” she murmured.

“That’s true, but thanks to you, the crime’s been solved anyway,” he returned.

Frank was right, and Audrey had to admit that it felt good to have helped her dear friend.

As she held Frank’s warm hand in her own, she was filled with hope for their future.